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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MADRID 001834

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [CU](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: SPAIN/CUBA: SPANISH VIEWS ON CUBA TRANSITION

REF: A. HAVANA 13876

[1](#)B. HAVANA 14039

[1](#)C. MADRID 1035

Classified By: Ambassador Eduardo Aguirre; reason 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. There is intense public interest and curiosity in Spain regarding what will happen in post-Fidel Cuba. While both the US and Spain clearly share the common long-term objective of a democratic Cuba, it is also clear that we have divergent views on how to achieve that objective. Where the USG favors a rapid transition to democracy, some elements of the Spanish Government favor a succession, followed by a gradual transition. Spain's views in support of a succession are conditioned by their own experience in the 1970s, by their fear of possible chaos in post-Fidel Cuba, by their concern with protecting Spanish economic interests in Cuba, and by a domestic political need to be seen acting independently of the USG on Cuba. An unnamed Spanish diplomat cited in a recent article in daily "El Pais" indicated that Spain is focused on developing relations with Raul Castro and Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Perez Roque on the basis that they will be the most likely leaders of a post-Fidel Cuban government. The same official criticized the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba and USG transition policy in general, saying Spanish policy was to "let the Cuban people decide" their own future.

[1](#)2. (C) However, in conversations with the Ambassador and others, Spanish officials have indicated their readiness to work out some of the differences in our approaches towards promoting change in Cuba, stressing that they share our overall goal of achieving a democratic Cuba (as in conversations with A/S Shannon and Cuba Transition Coordinator McCarry). Vice President Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega and FM Moratinos have downplayed with the Ambassador any differences on Cuba, and have instead stressed that the USG and Spain are working together now to discuss transition issues. Given stepped up Castro government planning to guarantee the continuation of the current regime (ref A), we believe it is important to pin down the official Spanish Government position on a succession versus a transition. Specifically, we need to determine whether Spain would immediately recognize a Raul Castro-led successor government or whether Madrid could be convinced to commit to delaying recognition until a transition is underway. We are addressing this issue in our own contacts, but this should also be one of the topics of our regular high-level discussions on Latin America, which ideally will take place again before Secretary Rice visits Madrid this fall. A potential opportunity for discussions between WHA A/S Shannon and Deputy Foreign Minister Leon may be the upcoming

inauguration ceremony in Bogota, where Deputy FM Leon will accompany the Crown Prince in representation of Spain. Depending on the results of these discussions, we should begin to consider how we would respond to Spanish efforts to ensure a soft landing for Fidel Castro's successors. End Summary.

//CUBA - ALWAYS A HOT TOPIC//

13. (C) For the Spanish Government, public interest and economic interests combine to make Cuba an important domestic, as well as foreign policy issue. Cubans and Cuban culture enjoy broad appeal in Spain, due in part to family bonds created by large-scale immigration in both directions over the past 150 years and also to current Spanish tourism to Cuba. The Castro revolution maintains a lingering appeal for Spanish leftists, though public opinion surveys consistently place Castro among the foreign leaders least-liked by Spanish citizens. In private conversations with the Ambassador and other US officials, President Zapatero has emphasized that he has no personal or professional friendship with Fidel Castro and is not interested in developing any such relationship.

14. (C) Economically, Cuba is the third largest destination for Spanish exports to Latin America (amounting to \$488 million in Spanish goods to Cuba in 2005) and some 170 companies belong to the the "Association of Spanish Companies in Cuba." Spain, which is believed to be the largest foreign investor in Cuba, views Cuba as a growth market with huge potential in the post-Fidel era and is eager to strengthen its hold before competitors (especially US competitors) arrive on the scene. We have suggested to President Zapatero and other Spanish officials that, rather than girding for US

MADRID 00001834 002 OF 003

competition in the post-Fidel era, Spain should take note of the fact that a joint strategy with the US would create a more stable climate for all businesses in Cuba and would facilitate an orderly multi-national effort to reconstruct Cuba's crumbling infrastructure.

15. (C) Given these circumstances, every Spanish government has had to engage on the Cuba issue, and most have had periods of friction with Castro. Under former President Aznar, Spain reached a high-water mark in terms of its emphasis on defense of human rights, (but Aznar also actively promoted Spanish investment in Cuba and criticized the Libertad Act and the US sanctions regime in general). Zapatero, wanting to mark a break with the Aznar era, reversed course and began to emphasize engagement with the Castro government and advocated a softening of the EU line on Cuba. The lack of Cuban reciprocity to Spanish overtures has led Foreign Minister Moratinos to put Cuba on the back-burner as a foreign policy issue and to await more favorable circumstances before advocating further engagement. But the underlying Spanish policy prioritizing engagement with regime elements remains unchanged. We have explored the potential for concerted action on Cuba in our discussions with Spanish officials and in the course of visits by WHA A/S Shannon and Cuba Transition Coordinator McCarry, including during meetings of the US-Spain high-level working group on Latin America. These discussions have not yet yielded progress towards concrete joint strategies on Cuba.

//SPAIN FOCUSED ON STABILITY, GRADUAL TRANSITION//

16. (C) Spanish sentiment favoring a succession is very much influenced by its own experience during the transition from the Franco dictatorship to electoral democracy. The Spanish Civil War and the Franco era are part of the living memory of older Spaniards, for whom the gradual, orderly political and social changes of the 1970s and 1980s represented a dramatic success. Spanish officials are convinced that elements of the Spanish model may be replicated in Cuba and that the key to success lies in achieving influence with Cuban regime

leaders and convincing them of the need for reforms. In their view, Fidel Castro himself is beyond influence and must be waited out, but all others represent potential reformers. Several Spanish officials have told us that it is not only acceptable, but preferable in Spain's view that Raul Castro, Felipe Perez Roque, or Vice President Carlos Lage take the reins after Fidel's departure in order to guarantee a stable climate for institution building and economic reforms. Spanish officials fear that weak leadership could quickly undermine law and order, leading to bloodshed, chaos and a humanitarian disaster. In their view, it is important to work towards a soft landing for Castro regime elements so that they (like Franco-era leaders before them) will feel it is safe to loosen their grip on power.

17. (C) Despite broad acceptance of the gradualist model among some Spanish officials, many with direct experience in Cuba also acknowledge fundamental differences between the Spain of 1976 and the Cuba of today. First and foremost, Franco permitted economic liberalization in the 1960s, laying the groundwork for positive economic growth and job creation in the 1970s, whereas the Cuban economy is in shambles and is based on unsustainable policies that will require massive restructuring. This virtually assures social disruptions in Cuba that Spain did not have to endure during its transition.

Also, there is no national figure in Cuba who can play the role undertaken by King Juan Carlos in Spain, who proved capable of binding both conservative and reformist elements in a campaign of national reconstruction. Some in Spain believe only the Cuban armed forces are in a position to play that stabilizing role, but they acknowledge that the MINFAR is an institution without a democratic vocation. Finally, there is no European Union or NATO for Cuba to join and Cuba's relations with the most important regional actor, the US, will be poor as long as the existing regime remains in power. These differences call into question the relevance of the Spanish transition model to Cuba's present-day reality.

//SPAIN "MODERATING" USG CUBA POLICY?//

18. (C) Coinciding with general support for the gradualist model among Spanish officials is a conviction that USG transition policy is misdirected and unlikely to succeed. There appears to be a perception among some Spanish officials that US policy is hostage to what they see as a shrill, extremist Cuban exile community and that the results of that

MADRID 00001834 003 OF 003

policy are likely to lead to instability in Cuba. In a special insert in the July 18 edition of the Spanish daily "El Pais," an unnamed Spanish diplomat involved in Cuba issues is quoted as saying that "Spain has no roadmap, like that of the United States, nor do we want one. In Spain's view, it is the Cuban people who must decide (on their future)." The article notes that while there have been few high level visits to Cuba by Spanish officials, an increasing number of high ranking Cuban officials are making discreet visits to Madrid. According to the Spanish diplomat cited in the report, the official Spanish message to these Cuban visitors is that Spain desires democratic reforms, but without the "violence or convulsions that may make such a transition more difficult." The article indicates that the Zapatero Government also maintains ties with Cuban dissidents such as Oswaldo Paya, Eloy Gutierrez Menoyo, and Marta Beatriz Roque (NOTE: the article repeats assertions by Spanish officials that Roque was released from prison due to pressure from Spain. Raul Rivero is not mentioned, but Spain did have a role in his release and has assisted him in his exile in Spain). The article implies that current opposition figures are not seen as credible political actors. COMMENT: The Spanish official cited in this article is more definitive regarding Spain's positions than any interlocutors have been with us, even in private conversations.

19. (C) The "El Pais" article also cites Cuba as an important topic of discussion between the US and Spain. It implies a

view among Spanish officials that these discussions are colored by differences regarding "Washington's use of pressure where Madrid maintains an open dialogue... Washington places a priority on indemnizations for those whose property was expropriated, whereas Spain believes the need for a successful transition trumps such issues..." However, official Spanish sources also acknowledge that the US, along with other regional actors such as Mexico, will be important actors in a transition and must therefore be engaged. The article suggests that a key Spanish objective will be to "moderate" the US role in a Cuba transition process, perhaps through the offices of "figures such as Senator Mel Martinez... who has demonstrated a certain openness to Spain's focus on not cutting links" to the Castro regime.

//COMMENT//

110. (C) As the Castro regime's plans for a succession coalesce (REF A), we should continue to engage the Spanish Government to encourage as much convergence as possible in terms of how we will deal with the post-Fidel era. We may or may not be able to bridge the gap between support for succession and support for transition, but Spain is a sufficiently important player (in the region and within the EU) that we should seek to do so. Our first priority is to determine whether:

- A) Spain plans to support a succession by Raul Castro; or,
- B) Whether Madrid could be convinced to commit to withholding recognition until a democratic transition is underway.

We suggest that this be included as a topic for discussion for the next high-level bilateral meeting on Latin America, which ideally will take place before Secretary Rice visits Madrid this fall. We understand that efforts to arrange a meeting between A/S Shannon and Deputy FM Rice are ongoing; one possibility for such a meeting could be on the margins of the upcoming inauguration ceremonies in Bogota, where Deputy FM Leon will accompany Crown Prince Felipe in representation of Spain. If we cannot gain Spain's support for withholding recognition of Raul Castro or other regime successor, we should anticipate strong Spanish pressure on its EU allies to follow its lead in recognizing such a government. We then should consider our own strategy to counter this position.

AGUIRRE